

Powerful Presentations



Public speaking skills are key to successful public relations

By Cindy Spohr

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to present on a topic I am passionate about to 500 people. Unfortunately the opportunity came with a one-week notice, and the invitation could not be declined. I wish I could say my response had been to marvel at what a great public relations opportunity it was, but it felt more like an opportunity to be terrified. I wasn't sure I would survive. But survive I did—and maybe even thrived a little—because of preparation, practice, and delivery.

Public relations is essentially about communication—projecting a favorable image to the public. And one aspect of communication is verbally expressing ideas effectively in individual and group situations. If we think about an average week for a law librarian, there are many situations where verbal communication and/or presentation skills come into play: the reference interview, sharing research results, teaching a class to law students or associates, one-on-one training in response to an individual research question, or presenting to a practice group, the faculty, the library committee, or to colleagues at an AALL Annual Meeting or chapter meeting.

Some of these situations involve one-on-one communication, while others are one-to-many or group presentations. Since for most people anxiety increases as the number of people to be addressed increases, my focus here is on preparing, practicing, and delivering group presentations.

Preparation

All audiences listen through the WIIFM filter: What's In It For Me. Preparation is critical to capturing and holding the interest of the audience.

The first step in preparation is to know your audience. In some situations you will be able to do a formal needs assessment, but for the majority of presentations this is not the case. So you need to learn about your audience through different avenues—work with the person who asked you to present to understand the size of the audience, their demographics, and your relationships with them. If possible, talk informally with several people who will be part of the audience to gather additional information.

The second step is to prepare your outline, including introduction, body, and close. Frequent preparation advice includes this model:

- Tell them what you are going to tell them
- Tell them
- Tell them what you told them.

Keep in mind that you are being asked to share your expertise, so be confident that you do have something to share with others. As you prepare your outline, clarify for yourself, and ultimately your audience, what message you want to communicate. What are your core message and key points?

Of the many public speaking courses I have had the opportunity to attend, Spring Asher of Speechworks/Asher Communication stands out as an excellent teacher. Asher has taught presentation skills at past Teaching Research in Private Law Libraries conferences and emphasizes that if you structure your presentation effectively, you can deliver it in three minutes, three hours, or three days. This is great advice that demonstrates the fundamental need for strong preparation. (One of my favorite e-newsletters is produced by Speechworks/Asher Communications: www.speechworks.net/newsletters/index.htm.)

From the outline you can write the first draft of your presentation, and then

edit as you crystallize your ideas and focus on your core message. This is an iterative process that will continue through practice.

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While drafting your presentation, develop anecdotes or stories from your own experience that will demonstrate or reinforce your message. Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, says, “We live in a world where facts are everywhere. If we wanted to know the gross domestic product of Ecuador, my kids could find that online in 15 seconds. What matters more now is the ability to put facts into context and deliver them with emotional impact. And that’s what a story does. . . . People process the world through story. Companies are now using a product’s backstory as a way to differentiate items in a crowded marketplace.” Of course, you can’t spend your entire presentation telling stories, but a few well-placed anecdotes will go a long way toward underscoring your core message.

Visual aid design is also a key component of your preparation. These days, this normally means using PowerPoint—remember that you are the expert and the presentation is for the audience. PowerPoint can be a great tool to assist in the delivery of your presentation; however, it can also become a terrible crutch. Don McMillan’s “Death by PowerPoint” video on YouTube is a great example on how NOT to use PowerPoint. I also recommend that you visit Garr Reynolds’ site (www.garrreynolds.com) to learn more about effective presentation design.

Group presentations take place in a variety of situations, and you need to prepare for the unexpected. Several years ago I was asked to present to a state bar association as one of several speakers in an afternoon of programming. The organizers indicated their goal for attendance was between 100 and 150 people; since this was the *goal*, I anticipated the actual attendance would be somewhat less than that. Imagine my surprise when I arrived in a room that could seat 300, and in front of the huge stage sat a half dozen tables with about 30 attorneys—yes, two-thirds of the room was empty. The first presenter used the stage, podium, and microphone, and, from my seat in the back, it didn’t appear

to work too well. Because of preparation and practice, I was able to adjust my attitude and my presentation. I spoke from the floor and created a more

personal presentation that generated discussion and questions.

Practice

Really. Practice, practice, practice—give your presentation out loud, more than once. Do this in front of a mirror, or, better yet, with a tape recorder or video camera. Another great option is to practice in front of a live “test” audience made up of trusted advisors who will provide constructive feedback (as gently as possible).

The more you practice, the more comfortable you will be with your material. You’ll learn if your preparation flow feels right or if it needs to be tweaked. You’ll be better able to address the audience, rather than your notes or your PowerPoint slides, and will be better prepared for questions and/or a group discussion.

Delivery

Successful delivery of the presentation is the end result of all of the preparation and practice. Here are a few basics:

Exude enthusiasm and confidence

I think of this as carrying the energy of the room. Your audience will have a hard time being interested and engaged if you are not.

Eliminate filler words, jargon, acronyms, and fad phrases

Rehearsal, especially with audio or video taping, will help you know if you are using filler words, and the first step to elimination is awareness. Once you know your weak spots, you can work on eliminating the “uhs,” “ums,”

“ers,” and “you knows” from your speech (both in individual conversations and presentations). You may not have the media present at all of your public speaking adventures, but you certainly don’t want your “you knows” to overshadow your message (as Caroline Kennedy recently experienced).

Every industry, professional group, practice group, association, etc., has a host of jargon and acronyms. Make sure your audience understands you by avoiding these words, or, at minimum, using the definition the first time you use it. Several years ago I attended a presentation during which the presenter mentioned “IPs” repeatedly but never defined the term. The audience thought he was talking about intellectual property—in fact, he was referring to information professionals. As you can imagine, the speaker had little impact other than to confuse the audience.

Avoid fad phrases Actually, at the end of the day, can we take that offline and look at the big picture to push the envelope for a win-win? ’nough said?

Don’t apologize

“I’m sorry, but I’m a little nervous.” “I’m sorry, but I had to rush to put these slides together.” “I’m sorry I’m moving quickly, but they didn’t give me enough time for this topic.” All of these statements point out the negative and translate into an impression that you are not prepared, and therefore may not be credible.

Continuous improvement is a great concept for public speaking—apply your learning to your next presentation.

Dale Carnegie said, “There are always three speeches, for every one you actually give. The one you practiced, the one you gave, and the one you wish you gave.” As part of your public relations program, seek

opportunities to present—the more you do, the more comfortable you will be with the entire process.

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